

(HBRC, 2003)

ENVIRONMENT

1777

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1777

Rabbits introduced

ANIMAL PEST

The Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)

History

European feral rabbits were first introduced to New Zealand from England in 1777 by James Cook. Early settlers were eager to introduce rabbits for sport, food and fur, with deliberate introductions in the 1840's and 1850's.

Despite initial failures to colonise, rabbits soon became successfully established, particularly in the South Island. As an indication of escalating rabbit numbers, exports of rabbit skins increased from 33,000 a year to 16 million a year between 1873 and 1893. By the 1890's, rabbits had reached pest proportions in many areas.

Lifecycle

Rabbits can multiply up to ten times their number in one year. The female can reproduce from three to four months of age, the gestation period is 28 days, and she may become pregnant again within 12 hours of giving birth.

A litter is usually of three to seven young, but litters of up to 14 have been recorded. The infant mortality rate is high; out of every hundred born, 10 may survive disease, predation and periods of wet weather to reach six months and one or two reach three years of age. However, enough young survive to enable rapid increases in rabbit populations.

Habitat

Rabbit prone areas in Hawke's Bay centre around pumice soils, coastal sand dunes and river beds such as the Waipawa, Tukituki, Ngaruroro and Tutaekuri.



European feral rabbit

Rabbits prefer short, sparsely-composed grassland, especially with areas of bare earth. Over-grazing of pasture with horses or sheep helps create rabbit-prone conditions.

What's the problem?

Rabbits compete directly with stock for grazing and reduce the amount of palatable pasture available to domestic stock. It has been estimated 10 rabbits eat as much pasture as one sheep. Over-grazing damages vegetation and leaves the soil exposed and vulnerable to erosion from wind and water. Rabbit burrowing also encourages tunnel erosion.

Rabbits are a menace to young pine and other timber trees. They damage horticultural crops such as commercially grown vegetables, as well as fruit trees in orchards. In urban areas they can damage small trees and shrubs, vegetable and flower gardens and newly cultivated lawns.

